

# SENATE BILL REPORT

## SB 5608

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As of January 13, 2022

**Title:** An act relating to free public access to state parks and lands.

**Brief Description:** Concerning free public access to state parks and lands.

**Sponsors:** Senators Wilson, L., Braun, Brown, Dozier, Fortunato, Hasegawa, Keiser, Rivers, Short, Wagoner and Wilson, J..

**Brief History:**

**Committee Activity:** Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks: 1/13/22.

**Brief Summary of Bill**

- Repeals the Discover Pass Program.
- Provides that the State Parks and Recreation Commission may not charge a fee for general park access or parking.
- Requires the State Treasurer to transfer \$30,553,000 from the general fund into the recreation access account beginning in fiscal year 2023.

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### SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, WATER, NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

**Staff:** Karen Epps (786-7424)

**Background:** Public Lands. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW), the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and the State Parks and Recreation Commission (SPRC) are charged with managing the public lands of the state. DFW owns or manages nearly 1 million acres of public land and 500 water access areas for fish and wildlife, habitat conservation, and wildlife-related recreation. DNR protects and manages 5.6 million acres of state-owned land. The state parks system includes 124 developed parks covering approximately 138,000 acres.

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*This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.*

Discover Pass Program. In 2011, the Legislature established the Discover Pass Program. The Discover Pass establishes a user fee for motor vehicle access to recreational areas managed by SPRC, DNR, and DFW. A Discover Pass costs \$30 per year, while a day-use permit costs \$11.50 per day. The annual Discover Pass is transferrable between two vehicles. The penalty for failure to display the required recreation access pass or permit is \$99. The penalty is reduced to \$59 if an individual provides proof of a Discover Pass purchase to the court within 15 days of being notified of a violation.

**Summary of Bill:** The Discover Pass Program is repealed. SPRC may not charge a fee for general park access or parking. A pass or permit issued by DFW is required to park a motor vehicle upon improved DFW access facilities. Beginning in fiscal year 2023, the State Treasurer must transfer \$30,553,000 from the general fund into the recreation access account on July 1, 2022. For each fiscal year thereafter, the State Treasurer must increase the total transfer by the fiscal growth factor for that fiscal year.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Requested on January 8, 2022.

**Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members:** No.

**Effective Date:** The bill takes effect on July 1, 2022.

**Staff Summary of Public Testimony:** PRO: Since the Discover Pass program started, there has been about 7 million less visits to state parks, a 14 percent annual decline, despite the state's population having grown by about 1 million since the Discover Pass was adopted. In light of the pandemic, it should be easier for folks to get outside, plan a picnic, take a hike, and access state parks. Requiring payment makes it harder for folks to access state parks.

CON: The Discover Pass makes it possible for parks to stay open and for funding to be stable. There have been festivals every year in the parks and initially there was some adverse reaction to the Discover Pass. The adverse reaction is gone and folks understand the need for the pass to keep parks open. Relying on general fund would lead to years when support is not as great as it is currently and funding would be cut. It is good to have some kind of reliable funding and the Discover Pass has worked to provide reliable funding. It would be better to find other ways to encourage folks to use the state parks, but it is important to ensure the success and openness of our parks by keeping the Discover Pass.

OTHER: The Discover Pass provides a significant amount of stability for State Parks to support outdoor recreation. Revenue from the Discover Pass is responsive to increases in visitation and this was especially important during the pandemic because visitation numbers went up 15 percent over the last couple of years. There have been changes to the Discover

Pass to improve equity and ease of use, including allowing two cars to share a pass, 12 free days, and the library Discover Pass opportunities. Washington is one of 37 states with an annual access fee and Washington's is one of the more affordable passes in the nation.

**Persons Testifying:** PRO: Senator Lynda Wilson, Prime Sponsor.

CON: Stetson Palmer, Friends of Schafer and Lake Sylvia State Parks—FO; Nancy Messmer, Friends of Hoko River State Park.

OTHER: Owen Rowe, Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission.

**Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying:** No one.